DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 350 508 CG 024 560

AUTHOR Simon, Cathryn; Gerber, Sterling
TITLE Spirituality and Counselor Preference in College Students.
PUB DATE [90]
NOTE 25p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Students; *Counselor Characteristics; *Counselor Qualifications; Higher Education; *Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Spirituality

ABSTRACT

Religious clients prefer to see a therapist who has a belief system similar to their own. In this study college students (N=194) from undergraduate psychology classes rated their willingness to see four hypothetical counselors when the word spirituality was included or excluded from the counselors' descriptions. Each counselor description included a name, academic degree, qualifications, years of experience, counseling style, specialty areas, clientele, and photograph of a woman between the ages of 30 to 45. Four parallel forms of the questionnaire were produced, each identical except for the addition of the word spirituality in the description of one of the four counselors. Mean ratings of counselors with and without spirituality were not significantly different. However, 11.8% of the students commented that the word "spirituality" or that their personal beliefs affected their ratings of the counselors. A desire to include spiritual issues of some sort in a counseling setting was expressed by 8.8% of the students. These results suggest that there are many students who prefer a counselor who is sensitive towards spiritual values. Counselors who are empathetic toward spiritual issues may serve their clients better by informing clients of their willingness to explore spiritual values in counseling. Further research, possibly of a descriptive nature, could aid in identifying particular groups who have an interest in spiritually empathetic counseling. (ABL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED350508

Spirituality and Counselor Preference in College Students

Cathryn Simon and Sterling Gerber

Department of Applied Psychology

Eastern Washington University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sterling Gerber

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Running head: SPIRITUALITY AND COUNSELOR PREFERENCE

CG024560

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Abstract

College students rated their willingness to see four counselors when the word spirituality was included or excluded from the counselors' description. Mean ratings of counselors with and without spirituality were not significantly different. However, 11.8% of the students commented that the word spirituality or their personal beliefs affected their ratings of the counselors. 8.8% of the students expressed a desire to include spiritual issues of some sort in a counseling setting. These results suggest that there are many students who prefer a counselor who is sensitive towards spiritual values. Counselors who are empathetic toward spiritual issues may serve their clients better by informing clients of their willingness to explore spiritual values in counseling.

Spirituality and Counselor Preference in College Students

A 1983 Gallup survey claims that one third of the U.S. population considers religious beliefs as the single most important dimension in their life. Another third considers their religious beliefs to be very important but not the dominant factor in their life (Gallup, 1984). Other surveys support the finding that religious beliefs are important to a majority of individuals (Gallup & Poling, 1980; Rosten, 1975) and that the majority believe in the existence of God. This is in contrast to past surveys of psychologists and counselors who show a relatively low commitment to theistic beliefs (Bergin, 1980; Nix, 1978). In a recent study, Bergin and Jenson (1990) supported the claim that therapists have low rates of conventional religious affiliation but suggested that they have more of an interest in spirituality than hitherto acknowledged. They attributed this discrepancy to a less traditional, less conventional, and more personal nature of spirituality in therapists. Nevertheless, many potential clients who are strongly religious are hesitant to seek counseling in a secular setting for fear that their beliefs will be treated as pathological, that their spiritual concerns will not be treated with respect, that therapists will not understand spiritual language and concepts etc. (Worthington & Scott, 1983).

Religious clients prefer to see a therapist who has a belief system similar to their own. Conservative Christians prefer to

see a counselor who describes him/her self as a Christian counselor (Keating & Fretz, 1990). Mormons often ask to see Mormon counselors (Richard & Davison, 1989). This is not surprising in light of the accumulated research on client/counselor similarity and client preference. Though the effect of client/counselor similarity on therapy outcome is equivocal, such dimensions as ethnicity, socioeconomic level, values and attitude similarity predispose a client toward initial acceptance of a counselor (for a review of the literature see Atkinson & Schein, 1986). Nor are the religious clients' fears that their religious values could be undermined by an atheistic counselor totally unfounded. Current research on the convergence of counselor and client values during therapy indicate that client values may change over the course of therapy to become more like that of the counselor (for a review of the literature on convergence see Kelly, 1990).

Given the high proportion of clients who consider spiritual values to be important, the effect of client/counselor similarity on counselor selection, and the phenomenon of convergence, there is reason to believe that there is a demand for counselors who are at least empathetic toward spiritual concerns and who are willing to discuss such concerns during therapy. Most studies to date have involved conservative Christians, but the overall tendency toward religious commitment in the U.S. population suggests that a non-sectarian counselor who is empathetic to

spiritual concerns might be of service to a wide variety of clients who desire a counselor who will be receptive toward their spiritual concerns.

The purpose of this study was to examine whether or not students' willingness to see a counselor increases when that counselor is described as being empathetic to spiritual issues. A spiritually empathetic counselor was defined operationally as a counselor whose description includes the word spirituality in the counselor's list of special interests, topics explored in therapy or elements of theory.

Method

Participants

A total of 194 participants (130 women and 64 men) were recruited from six undergraduate classes of the Applied Psychology Department at Eastern Washington University. The mean age of participants was 27.2 years (SD=8.7) with a range of 19 to 52 years.

Instrument

A questionnaire describing four hypothetical counselors was prepared (see appendix A). Each counselor description included a name, academic degree, qualifications, years of experience, counseling style, specialty areas, clientele (individual, family, adults, children, etc.) and a black and white photo of a woman between the ages of approximately 30 to 45. Each description was approximately 60 words in length. In order to give the

impression of distinct counselors, the descriptions contained no overlap in counseling styles or areas of interest. Academic degrees and years of experience varied but indicated sufficient expertise to practice therapy. Counselor gender was held constant in order to eliminate possible interactions between counselor gender, spirituality and participant gender. All counselors were women.

Four parallel forms of the questionnaire were produced, each identical except for the addition of the word spirituality in the description of one of the four counselors. On form A spirituality was added to counselor 1's description. On form B, spirituality was added to counselor 2's description, etc. In each case, the word spirituality was added to the list of special issues or areas of focus and was the last word in the description.

Following each description the form asked participants to rate their agreement with the statement "I would be willing to see this counselor" on a seven point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree). An optional question asked participants to indicate what aspect(s) of the counselor led to the rating.

Procedure

During class time, students were invited to participate in a research project to study what aspects of a counselor influence students' willingness to see a counselor. No mention of spirituality as a specific focus was made. Students who chose to participate were asked to imagine that they currently had some issue that they were considering discussing with a counselor and were actively "counselor shopping". Then they were asked to read the counselor descriptions, rate their willingness to see each counselor and express what aspects of the counselors influenced their ratings. Forms A, B, C, and D of the questionnaire were distributed randomly to the participants without any indication that differences existed between questionnaires. Approximately ten minutes were allowed for completion of the questionnaire after which questionnaires were collected and participants thanked for their assistance.

Data analysis and processing

An analysis of variance was run on counselor ratings using a 4 X 2 factorial design (4 counselors X 2 spirituality levels, without and with spirituality). Comments regarding aspects of counselors that influenced rating were tabulated according to the number of positive and negative comments for each aspect (word, phrase, etc.) of the counselor description.

Results

Analysis of variance

The ANOVA revealed a significant counselor effect ($p<.001$), no significant spirituality effect and no significant interaction between spirituality and counselor effects. A Tukey's HSD multiple comparison test indicated that counselor 3 was rated significantly lower than counselors 1 and 2 ($p<.001$ and $p<.05$ respectively).

Participant comments on spirituality

Twenty three participants (11.8% of total participants) indicated that the word spirituality or their personal religious beliefs affected their willingness to see a counselor. Of these 23 individuals, 14 (7.2% of participants) indicated a greater willingness to see the counselor due to the spiritual emphasis, 8 (4.1% of participants) indicated decreased willingness and 1 (.5% of participants) requested more information concerning the type of spirituality. Of the eight participants who indicated decreased willingness to see the counselor, two identified themselves as Christians and indicated an interest in a specifically Christian counselor. Hence, a total of 17 (8.8% of participants) indicated a willingness to include spiritual issues of some kind in a counseling setting.

Other participant comments

Table 1 shows the number of positive and negative comments given for various aspects of counselors. Only comments that could

be traced to specific elements of the counselor description are listed. Comments such as "Nothing in particular struck me about this counselor" or "I like her areas of specialty" are not included in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

The phrase which received the most comments was "holistic...addressing all aspects of the human being" and was located in counselor 3's description. Seventy two participants (37% of the total) indicated that this phrase affected their rating of the counselor. Fifty six indicated increased willingness and 16 indicated decreased willingness to see counselor 3 due to her holistic approach.

The phrase "results without long term therapy" in counselor 1's description received the second most comments. Fifty five participants (28% of the total) indicated that this description affected their willingness to see the counselor (50 were favorably affected, 5 were unfavorably affected).

The third most frequent category of comments involved counselor appearance. Twenty six participants indicated greater willingness to see the counselor due to her personal appearance; 11 were disinclined to see the counselor due to her appearance. This category contains comments on the appearance of all four counselors and so it is inflated relative to the other categories

which, in general, involve only one counselor. Two other categories which are composites of all four counselors are experience and breadth of practice.

The descriptors "nonjudgmental" in counselor 2 and an emphasis on "goal setting" in counselor 4 were fourth and fifth most commented upon. In both cases the comments were overwhelmingly in favor of these aspects. The word spirituality was sixth in number of comments elicited. Several other popular descriptors were "an emphasis on self empowerment" (counselor 4), "direct and active style" (counselor 1), and "encourages clients to explore new directions in their lives" (counselor 2).

Total number of comments received by each counselor is shown in Table 2. This total includes vague and general comments not tabulated in Table 1.

Insert Table 2 about here

Discussion

Spirituality effects

The ANOVA results did not support the hypothesis that spiritually empathetic counselors will receive higher ratings by students. Though 11% of the participants indicated that the word spirituality or their own beliefs influenced their ratings of counselors, the influence did not produce statistically

significant differences in mean ratings. This could be due to several problems in the present design.

First of all, the instrument may not have been sensitive enough to pick up differences due to spirituality given the sample size. In order to create believable counselors many extraneous factors were introduced, all of which presumably affected counselor ratings to some extent. The effect of spirituality in comparison to the variability introduced by these extraneous factors may have been too small to be detected given the sample size. If sample size were increased, particularly for the counselor with spirituality cells, or if the counselor description were simplified such that there were fewer extraneous variables, and so presumably less variance, it is possible that spirituality may have shown a significant effect.

Secondly, for the sake of consistency, the word spirituality was placed at the end of each description. It is possible that this position reduced the effect of the word. Initial observations carry greater weight than subsequent observations, according to the halo effect, and counselor ratings may have been essentially determined before the participant came to the word spirituality at the end of the description. By placing the word spirituality at the beginning, or closer to the beginning of the description its effect might be amplified.

Thirdly, this study did not attempt to categorize students into spiritually significant subgroups (such as high or low,

Christian or non-Christian) by self-report or by any other criterion. If participants had been asked to classify themselves by one or more spiritual or religious dimensions the effect of counselor spirituality could be examined for different subgroups. For example, conservative Christians may have ranked the spiritually empathetic counselor lower because she was not specifically Christian while liberal Christians may have ranked her higher. Alternatively, nonreligious individuals may rate the spiritually empathetic counselor lower and religious individuals may rate her higher. There may be several factors that influence willingness to see a spiritually empathetic counselor including both type and intensity of spiritual belief. Because all participants were averaged together without respect to these factors, possible significant effects may have been hidden due to cancellation. Student comments lend support to this hypothesis.

The above comments indicate ways in which a significant effect from spirituality may have been hidden due to design flaws. On the other hand, the results may reflect a lack of sensitivity toward spirituality in counseling. The recent Gallup polls (Gallup, 1984; Gallup & Poling, 1980) and proponents of spiritually empathetic counseling (Bergin, 1980; Worthington & Scott, 1983) may have over estimated the importance of spirituality to the population in general. Nevertheless, participant comments as well as informal polling of the participants several weeks after data collection (see appendix

B), seem to indicate that there are many students who prefer a spiritually empathetic counselor, all other things being equal. Furthermore, the results of the ANOVA may reassure those counselors who wish to work with spiritual issues in counseling but who have been reluctant to bill themselves as spiritually empathetic counselors for fear of negative impressions. This study suggests that a counselor who included spirituality in her description would not experience adverse reactions from the majority of individuals seeking counseling.

Other effects

Counselor 3 was rated significantly lower than counselors 1 and 2. Though the multitude of variables precludes the possibility of drawing definitive conclusions, some plausible hypotheses can be entertained. First of all, this could be due partially to their positions on the page. Presuming that participants read and rated the counselors in the order presented, counselor 1 and 2 had little or no competition. However, participants may have compared counselors 3 and 4 against the first two counselors and so perhaps the last two fared worse.

Secondly, a few observations can be made pertaining to counselor 3. Counselor 3 obtained the fewest number of total comments and the greatest number of negative comments. She had the fewest years of experience (7 years), an M.A. (compared to a Ph.D., M.S., and M.S.W.) and she was described as being holistic.

This word received the greatest number of both positive and negative responses, and hence was the most controversial word on the questionnaire. Her specialties were the least commented upon compared to the other counselors, possibly indicating that many participants did not see her specialties (co-dependency, stress management and addiction) as relevant to their needs. Her lower rating is likely a combination of effects including a perception of a less qualified counselor using unorthodox methods whose areas of specialties did not appeal to many students.

Counselor 1 had the highest mean score though not significantly different from counselors 2 and 4. Her popularity seemed to be due primarily to the statement that her counseling led to "results without long term therapy". Another aspect that strongly affected her rating was her personal appearance. Counselor 1 received over four times as many favorable comments in this area than the other counselors. Interestingly, the picture used for counselor 1 was the only picture of an actual counselor, the others being pictures of university staff members.

The ratings for counselor 2 were most affected by the description of her counseling style: "supportive and nonjudgmental". Ratings for counselor 4 were most affected by her areas of emphasis: "goal setting, self empowerment and personal choice".

Table 2 shows that for each counselor positive comments outweighed negative comments by a ratio of approximately 3:1.

This could be explained in several ways. Participants may be more willing to give positive than negative feedback. One of the well known shortcomings of a rating scale is the reluctance of raters to assign unfavorable ratings (Anastasi, 1988). This principle might also be extended to an unwillingness to report negative impressions in the form of comments. Secondly, counselor descriptions written as if to attract clients may receive more positive comments simply because they are designed to be appealing and to show the counselors' strengths. Thirdly, lack of comment may simply indicate that nothing in particular stood out in the counselor's description, thus resulting in a lower rating. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that the pattern of mean counselor ratings parallels the total number of comments (Counselor 1 first, counselor 2 second, counselor 4 third, and counselor 3 last). It appears that total number of comments may be a good indicator of mean rating of a counselor. As in resume writing, seemingly the best strategy is to stand out in the reader's mind.

Conclusion

Though counselor rating was not significantly affected by the addition of spirituality to counselor descriptions, student comments and informal polling suggest that spirituality may be an important factor in selecting a counselor for some students. Further research, possibly of a descriptive nature, could aid in identifying particular groups who have an interest in spiritually

empathetic counseling. This study suggests that counselors who identify themselves as empathetic to spiritual issues may do so without discouraging clients in general. This would facilitate self-referral of those individuals who prefer spiritually empathetic counselors.

References

Anastasi, A. (1988). Psychological testing. New York: Macmillan.

Atkinson, D. R. & Schein, S. (1986). Similarity in counseling. The Counseling Psychologist, 14:319-354.

Bergin, A. E. (1980). Psychotherapy and religious values. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 48:95-105.

Bergin, A. E. & Jensen, J. P. (1990). Religiosity of psychotherapists: a national survey. Psychotherapy, 27:3-7.

Gallup, G. (1981). Religion in America. Princeton, NJ: Gallup Organization and Princeton Religion Research Center.

Gallup, G. & Poling, D. (1980). The search for America's faith. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.

Keating, A. M. & Fretz, B. R. (1990). Christians' anticipations about counselors in response to counselor descriptions. Journal of Counseling Psychology, 37:293-296.

Kelly, T. A. (1990). The role of values in psychotherapy: a critical review of process and outcome effects. Clinical Psychology Review, 10:171-186.

Nix, V. C. (1978). A study of the religious values of psychotherapists. Dissertation Abstracts International, 39:1965B.

Richards, P. S. & Davison, M. L. (1989). The effects of theistic and atheistic counselor values on client trust: a multidimensional scaling analysis. Counseling and Values, 33:109-120.

Rosten, L. (Ed.). (1975). Religion in America. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Worthington, E. L. Jr. & Scott, G. G. (1983). Goal selection for counseling with potentially religious clients by professional and student counselors in explicitly Christian or secular settings. Journal of Psychology and Theology, 11:318-329.

Appendix A

Counselor Descriptions

The following are the descriptions of counselors 1, 2, 3, and 4 with the word spirituality included in each. On any one form only one of the four descriptions included spirituality.

Counselor 1: Carol Rathbone, M.S.

Carol is a licensed and certified therapist who has been practicing in Spokane for the last nine years. Her direct and active style leads to results without long term therapy. Carol does individual counseling and leads support groups. Her areas of special skill are treatment of depression, low self esteem, phobias, domestic violence, gender issues, communication, intimacy and spirituality.

Counselor 2: Sandra Stevens, Ph.D.

Sandra is a licensed psychologist who does individual, family and group therapy. Her supportive and nonjudgmental approach encourages clients to explore new directions in their lives. For the past ten years she has been helping people with relationships, life transitions, grief issues, anger control, problem solving, personal growth and spirituality.

Counselor 3: Joanne Gordon, M.A.

Joanne is a certified mental health counselor who has offered her services to the people of Spokane for the last seven years. She sees individuals, both adults and children, in her practice. Joanne's specialties are treatment of addiction and

co-dependency, stress management and play therapy. Her holistic approach to counseling addresses all aspects of the human being, including mind, body, emotions, relationships and spirituality.

Counselor 4: Laurie Robbins, M.S.W.

Laurie Robbins is a licensed therapist who has practiced individual, couples and family counseling for the past twelve years. Her fresh and innovative approach to eating disorders, insomnia, addictive behaviors and marital problems has given her a unique ability to help people who are ready to change destructive patterns in their lives. In therapy, Laurie emphasizes the roles of goal setting, self empowerment, personal choice and spirituality.

Appendix B

Informal Polling Following Research Presentation

Several weeks after data collection was completed, three of the six classes were given a presentation explaining the purpose and design of the experiment. Hypotheses concerning spirituality in a counseling setting were presented and discussed. Then an informal polling of students' rating of counselors was repeated by asking the following question: All other things being equal, would you rate a spiritually empathetic counselor higher, lower, or the same as a counselor who was not empathetic to spiritual concerns. Of 94 students, 44 (47%) said they would rate the spiritually empathetic counselor higher, 35 (37%) said they would rate the spiritually empathetic counselor the same and 15 (16%) said they would rate the spiritually empathetic counselor lower than a counselor who was not empathetic to spiritual concerns. Though this informal polling is biased by a possible halo effect, among other things, of a presentation by a spiritually empathetic researcher, it nevertheless indicates that there is a significant proportion of students who are interested in dealing with spiritual issues in counseling.

Table 1

Comments on Specific Words or Attributes in Counselor Descriptions

Topic of comment	Counselor	Number of comments		
		Total	Positive	Negative
holistic, all aspects of the person	3	71	55	16
results without long term therapy	1	55	50	5
personal appearance	1,2,3,4	37	26	11
nonjudgmental	2	34	33	1
emphasizes goal setting	4	33	31	2
spirituality	1,2,3,4	23	14	9
explore new directions	2	22	17	5
direct and active style	1	21	14	7
emphasizes self empowerment	4	20	18	2
years of experience	1,2,3,4	18	16	2
supportive	2	18	16	2
emphasizes personal choice	4	12	12	0
change destructive patterns	4	10	6	4
breadth of practice	1,2,3,4	10	6	4
addictions	3	9	8	1
Ph.D.	2	7	3	4
emphasizes personal growth	2	6	6	0
communication	1	6	6	0
codependency	3	6	6	0
life transitions	2	6	5	1
fresh and innovative approach	4	6	5	1
support groups	1	5	5	0
stress management	3	5	5	0
relationships	2	5	5	0
family therapy	2,4	5	5	0

(table continues)

Topic of comment	Counselor	Number of comments		
		Total	Positive	Negative
emphasizes problem solving	2	5	5	0
anger control	2	5	5	0
self esteem	1	4	4	0
licensed and certified	1	4	4	0
psychologist	2	4	2	2
certified mental health counselor	3	4	1	3
play therapy	3	3	3	0
eating disorders	4	3	2	1
gender issues	1	3	1	2
intimacy	1	2	2	0
grief	2	2	2	0
domestic violence	1	2	2	0
works with emotions	3	1	1	0
results	1	1	1	0
insomnia	4	1	1	0
therapist	1	1	0	1

Table 2

General Comments on Counselors

Counselor	Number of comments		
	Total	Positive	Negative
1	180	148	32
2	158	120	38
3	136	97	39
4	146	112	34
Total	620	477	143